



HIDDEN TREASURES: THE METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF UNEARTHING OLDER GAY MEN

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The invisibility of older gay men from any readily identifiable sampling frame has contributed to a paucity of research about this population. A number of methodological challenges must be overcome to reach these older gay men and research their experiences. Factors thought to contribute to this invisibility include the absence of older gay men from the identifiable gay scene, and the demographic characteristics of older gay men who are more likely to live in suburban and regional areas. Research efforts to recruit these men have traditionally been resource intensive, yet still resulted in small sample sizes. Alternative recruitment methods are discussed including the use of Internet, email, newsgroups and snowball sampling.

The last edition of *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology* provided a compelling reminder of the sense of invisibility that may be experienced by older gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people (Harrison, 2006; Lo, 2006). It has been suggested that older GLBT people are the least visible of all subpopulations of GLBT people (Blando, 2001). Although this is slowly being recognised, there is still much work to be done to allow these silent voices to be heard. Researchers in this field face significant challenges when attempting to access this hidden population. A recent research experience focussing upon older gay men is offered to highlight some of these methodological challenges. These reflections are drawn from Doctoral research exploring the relationship between a sense of belonging to gay communities and older gay men's mental health.

The research that has been conducted to date predominantly focuses upon the experiences of a particular subgroup of the older gay male population. The participants tend to be middle-class, highly educated, Caucasian, are out of the closet and live in larger metropolitan areas (Shankle, Maxwell, Katzman, & Landers, 2003). These subjects tend to be drawn from those involved with the mainstream 'gay community' due to the visibility and relative ease of access to this population (Porter, Russell, & Sullivan, 2004). Furthermore, a large Australian study of 2,583 homosexually active men suggests a general trend of older gay men moving outwards towards suburban and regional areas, whilst younger gay men move inwards towards urban areas (Van de Ven, Rodden, Crawford, & Kippax, 1997). These factors combine to contribute to an under representation of subgroups of older gay men in research. The result is that little is known about subgroups of older gay men who are disconnected from gay communities or who live outside of metropolitan areas.

A significant barrier to the recruitment of this invisible population is the resources required to reach them. It requires a large investment of time and money to access this population and further our understanding of their experiences. A recent American study combined the resources of a senior gay men's network in New York, a national task force, and a major university to examine the social networks of older gay men (Shippy, Cantor, & Brennan, 2004). Recruitment methods included mailing all major GLBT organisations, Internet outreach, articles in community publications, and face-to-face recruitment through health clinics,

senior centres, and major events in the community. This was further supplemented with snowball sampling to encourage respondents to recruit other older gay men. The result of this effort was a distribution of 700 questionnaires, achieving a sample of 223 men in their desired age range of 50 to 82. This relatively small sample that was achieved reflects the difficulties experienced and resources required by researchers to reach this population. This occurs even in a large city such as New York that is renowned for its gay population.

The Doctoral research conducted by this researcher did not benefit from the resources or significant partnerships of these studies. It was conducted on a small budget, with no additional staffing, and on a part-time basis. The same elusive population of older gay men was sought, in addition to contrasting groups of younger gay men, and heterosexual men. The research questions examined the contribution of belonging to gay communities to gay men's mental health, therefore a subpopulation of gay men was also required who were disconnected from gay community. The dilemma between having limited resources yet desiring a predominantly inaccessible population provided a number of methodological challenges and limitations upon this research. It necessitated a rationalisation of resources to maximise the success of recruitment strategies to reach the target populations.

A decision was made to not advertise in the mainstream gay press due to the limited reach of these publications. These newspapers are typically distributed through commercial gay venues, and targeted towards GLBT people already connected to or interested in this scene. A sample of these free publications suggests readership over 45 years of age is as little as 2% for a glossy magazine and 16% for a community newspaper (Melbourne Community Voice, 2006). The commercial gay scene itself is not necessarily a rich

source of recruitment for older gay people, with over half of gay men older than 50 indicating they feel less welcome in gay places and spaces as they get older (Heaphy, Yip, & Thompson, 2003). The practical and ethical limitations of recruiting older gay men at sex-on-site venues and beats were explored. This is likely to be a source of older gay men otherwise disconnected from gay communities. It was decided that any attempt to recruit through these method may be perceived as intrusive and at odds with the cultural anonymity of these spaces.

The Internet is a relatively new and largely untested medium for recruiting older gay men. The popular gay portal 'gay.com' suggests that as little as 12% of customers accessing their websites are aged over 45 years old (Planet Out, 2006). Computer and internet usage decreases generally with age, however 43.5% of Australian men aged 45-54 years and 12.3% of men aged 65-74 years still regularly use the internet. (Lloyd & Bill, 2004). In this Doctoral research, email and Internet newsgroups were used extensively to attempt to reach this percentage of men who are internet users, even if not active participants in gay specific websites. An internet-based version of the questionnaire was developed that could be accessed directly by recipients of these emails. This method has the advantage of providing a prompt and immediate access point to the questionnaire for willing respondents. Although it was a successful method of recruiting some of these older gay men, if it was used exclusively it would have placed significant limitations on the generalisability of the results to non-internet users.

Face-to-face recruitment was conducted at gay community events in metropolitan and regional areas. This provided some opportunity to reach gay men who only attend these annual events. Events specific for older GLBT people were also

attended, with the cooperation of the organisations that conducted them. These face-to-face methods were successful at reaching a subpopulation that are generally disconnected from other aspects of gay communities. The festive nature of the events themselves did not generally lend themselves towards conducting research. They were however successful mediums for raising awareness of the research and making contact with willing respondents. The greatest number of questionnaires was completed at an event when a raffled prize was used as an incentive to return it the same day.

Snowball sampling has commonly been used within the field to achieve a non-random sample of older gay and lesbian people (Bennett & Thompson, 1991; D'Augelli, Grossman, Hershberger, & O'Connell, 2001; Dorfman, Walters, Burke, Hardin, & Karanik, 1995; King et al., 2003). The utility of snowball sampling of older gay men and lesbians for mental health research was investigated by a team of UK researchers (Warner, Wright, Blanchard, & King, 2003). These researchers asked respondents to take five recruitment packs, one for themselves and four to distribute to their friends. It was found that snowball sampling was a useful way of identifying individuals who were not easily accessible through the gay scene. No significant differences were found between the initial respondents and snowballed respondents in terms of age, living conditions, social class, membership of gay or lesbian-oriented organisations and attendance at gay or lesbian venues. The recent Doctoral research utilised a snowball sampling technique, asking respondents if they knew a friend of a similar age who was likely to be willing to participate. Although the efficacy of this method cannot be determined, many respondents were willing and enthusiastic about recruiting one of their friends as a participant.

The research discussed suggests that despite the methodological difficulties that

exist, researching this population can be achieved with minimal resources. The Internet and email provide low cost alternative methods for recruiting older gay men, however the limitations of these recruitment method should be noted. Face-to-face recruitment at annual community events provided some further opportunities for recruitment, with an incentive to complete the questionnaire on-the-spot an effective strategy. Snowball sampling proved to be a particularly effective method of reaching respondents who would otherwise have not been accessible. The sampling frame for this research would have been strengthened by employing a number of 'agents' who would have been paid a small incentive to utilise their personal contacts and networks to reach the most isolated and disconnected gay men.

The results of this research will further our understanding of the role of gay communities in relation to older gay men's mental health. It further serves to illustrate a number of the methodological difficulties in reaching this predominantly invisible population. Older GLBT people have typically endured a level of discrimination and persecution that has paved a path for the freedoms that are currently experienced. This legacy is owed a steadfast determination to continue investing the resources and effort required to understand their experiences and to tell their stories.

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